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Fertile Ground: The Impact of the Natural Learning Environment on the Social/Emotional Development of Students with Autism and/or Sensory Processing Disorder

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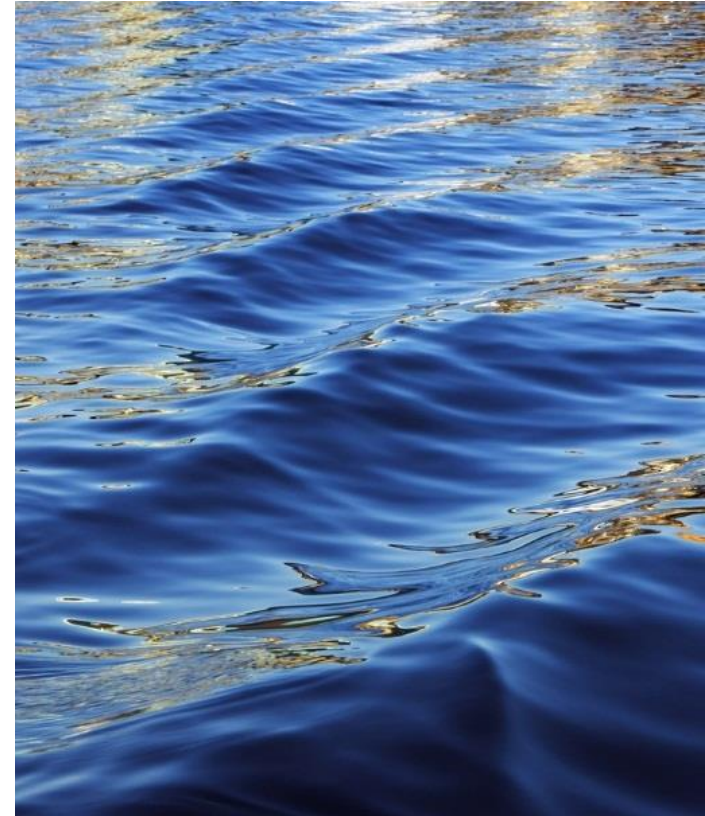
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Natural Learning Environments and the Social-Emotional Development of Students with Sensory Challenges

by
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Scholarly and Creative Works
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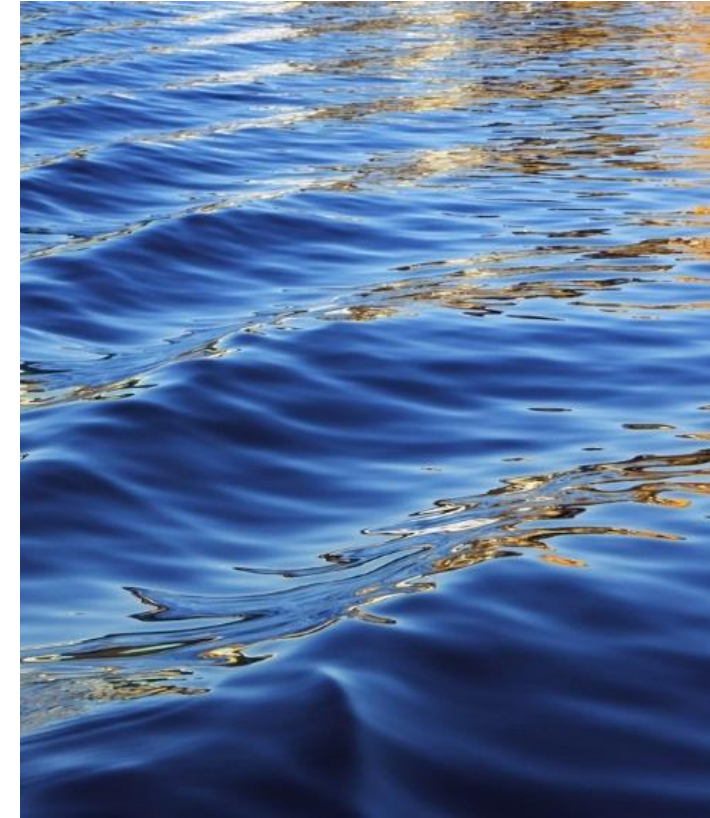


Introduction

RESEARCH QUESTION:

What is the affect of a natural learning environment on the social behavior, communication, and participation of seven students with Autism (ASD) and/or Sensory Processing Disorder (SPD) at a non-public school in Northern California?

- Students spend approximately 15% of their lives inside the classroom.
- Students with ASD/SPD experience difficulty with processing sensory stimuli from the traditional classroom environment.
(Baranek, Foster, & Berkson, 1997; Brown & Dunn, 2010)
- Least Restrictive Environment was introduced with I.D.E.A. to encourage mainstreaming and integration with neurotypical peers (equality rather than equity).
(Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, 2004)
- If the traditional classroom is a source of sensory dysfunction, a natural learning environment may reduce sensory distress.



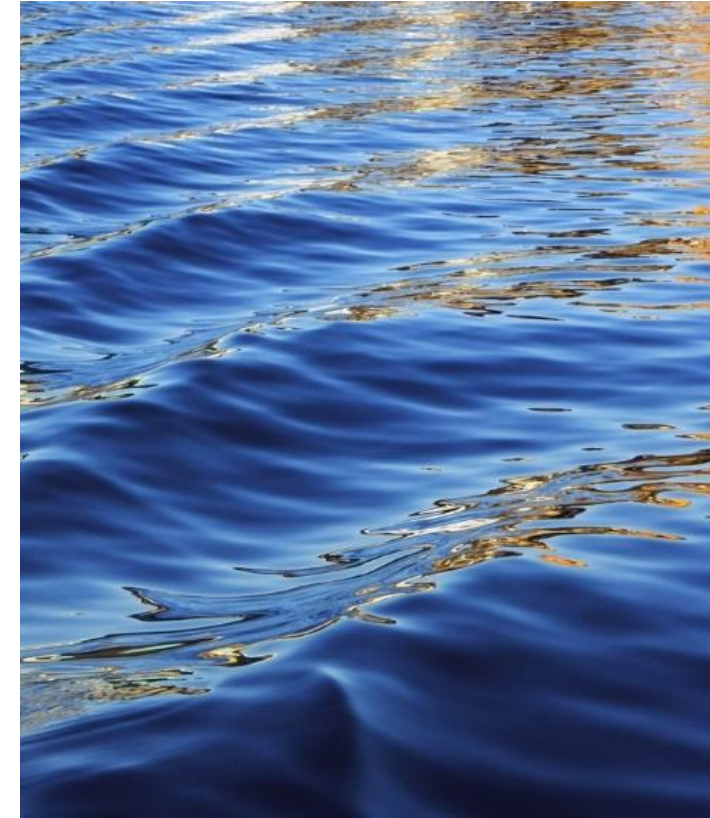
Review of Literature

Gap in Literature:

Little to no research with regard to a natural learning environment (in an educational context) specifically for students with sensory challenges.


Themes discovered through the literature:

- **Sensory Processing Challenges in the Classroom**
 - Negative social and academic impact
(Ashburner, Ziviani, & Rodger, 2008; Hilton et al. 2010)
- **Least Restrictive Environment**
 - Emphasis on mainstreaming in traditional classrooms
(71 Fed. Reg. 46587)
- **Nature Deficit Disorder**
 - Exposure to nature is essential for healthy human development
(Louv, 2005; Louv, 2008)



The Study



- 7 participating students (aged 12-14)
- 7 participating parents
- 14 participating paraprofessionals/teachers (surveys)
- 5 participating paraprofessionals (observations/data collection)

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- Students participated in the regular school day in beach, meadow, and forest environments
 - Mixed Methods:
 - Direct observation, surveys: Qualitative
 - Behavioral data collection: Quantitative
 - Parent Surveys
 - Paraprofessional/Teacher Surveys
 - Student surveys

Transformative Approach: desire to transform how students with ASD/SPD access their education



Findings

- 
- **Regulation of Sensory Input**
 - decrease of maladaptive behaviors
 - agency over sensory input/output
 - **Less Restrictive Environment**
 - academic performance improvement
 - **Social-Emotional Well-being**
 - increased communication
 - increased self-efficacy and advocacy
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Conclusion

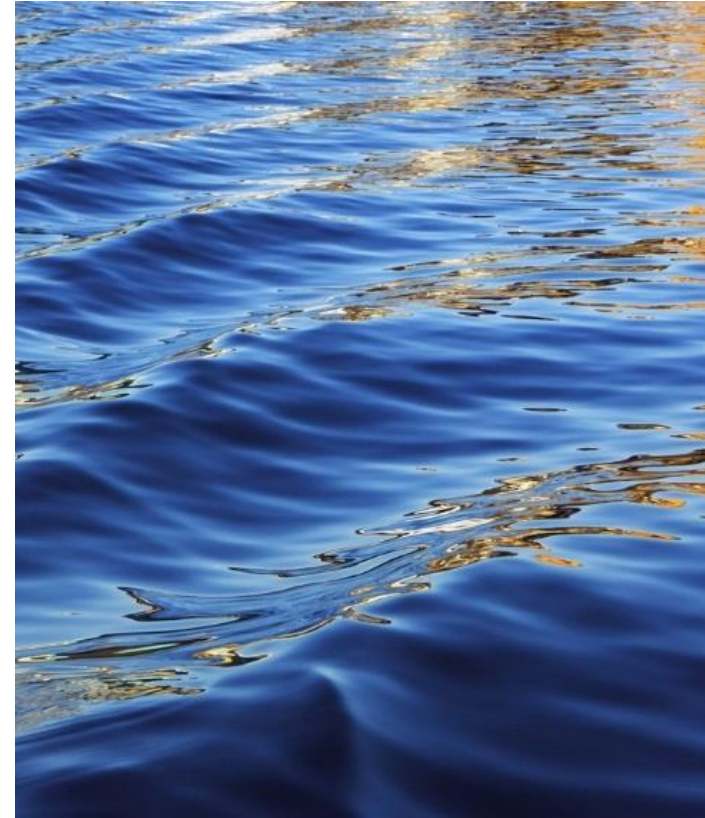
Roles students play in their sensory experience:

Sensory seeker/avoider: avoiding harmful stimuli and seeking coping mechanisms

Sensory receiver/explorer: receiving natural and subtle stimuli and exploring ways to interact with the stimuli

Students should be provided with a learning environment which promotes equity and that provides student agency over their sensory experience.

Limitations of Study: sample size and population, access to outdoor space



Questions?



Thank you
very much!

